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RR RUEHBC RUEHDA RUEHDE RUEHIHL RUEHKUK  
DE RUEHGB #0892/01 0911131  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 011131Z APR 09  
FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2497  
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE  
RUEHYE/AMEMBASSY YEREVAN 0018

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000892

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [IZ](#) [AM](#)

SUBJECT: Armenian Community Clings to Independence in Kirkuk.

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11. (SBU) SUMMARY: On March 11 PRT Kirkuk visited leaders of the Armenian community at their headquarters in Kirkuk City. The 93 Armenian families in Kirkuk (520 people) are the remnants of the Armenians that fled persecution in Turkey between 1915 and 1918. While the Armenian population has dropped over the past 50 years, it appears to have stabilized over the past couple of years. The Kirkuk Armenians are closely tied to other groups of Armenians across Iraq, the largest of which is in Baghdad. The Armenians are fiercely independent and consciously remove themselves from the political landscape in Kirkuk. The self-described goal of the Armenian community is to maintain their "language, religion and ethnicity". They appear to have good relations with the other ethnicities in Kirkuk, and maintain especially close ties with the Assyrians. There is no evidence of any persecution or discrimination against this small ethnic group. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) On March 11, PRT Team Leader along, with IPA0, visited leaders of Kirkuk's Armenian community at their headquarters in the Almas area of Kirkuk City. This trip is part of an ongoing PRT outreach initiative to minority communities in Kirkuk province. The meeting took place in the well furnished office of Keork Stragyam, Chairman of the Armenian Ethnic Committee (AEC). The AEC is a five-member committee that acts as the primary governing body in the Armenian community. Four other Armenian leaders attended the meeting: Father Avedek Marderosyan, the lone priest of the Armenian Orthodox Church in Kirkuk; Mases Sarkesyan, Secretary of the AEC; and Agob Yagobyan and Rafi Yeranossyan, both members of the AEC. Both Mases and Agob are also employed as engineers at the Northern Oil Company (NOC). The meeting took place at the Armenia{ ?b('9Q00}g,Bx building, which doubles as a sports complex, complete with a large meeting hall and an outdoor basketball court.

13. (U) The 93 Armenian families (520 people) in Kirkuk are the remnants of the Armenian Diaspora that fled persecution in Turkey between 1915 and 1918. The Armenians that fled to Iraq came in several waves, each settling in a different area of Iraq. There are surviving Armenian communities in Baghdad, Basra, Kirkuk, Zakho, Dahuk, Mosul, and Erbil. Baghdad contains the largest Armenian community in Iraq (estimated by the Kirkuki Armenians at 6000 people), and is the center of authority for the Armenian Orthodox Church (also known as the Armenian Apostolic Church). Each of the Armenian communities in Iraq except Erbil has an elected five-member AEC subordinate to the AEC in Baghdad. According to Keork Stragyam, there are approximately 20,000 Armenians currently living in Iraq, with Baghdad and Basra maintaining the largest populations.

14. (U) The Kirkuk Armenians have seen their population drop from almost 4000 people in 1958, to 750 in 2003, and now 520 people. The vast majority of those leaving Iraq have settled in the Los Angeles area, with a smaller population residing in France. According to the Armenian leaders, unemployment is the primary reason for emigration; however security has also been a factor. They pointed out that, while Armenian emigration from Kirkuk has not completely

stopped, the population seems to have stabilized in the past year or so. The Armenian leaders also reported that Armenians from the South of Iraq, particularly Basra, are slowly moving northward to cities such as Mosul, Kirkuk and Erbil. Shi'a persecution is the primary reason for this migration. Despite the precipitous decrease in their population over the past 50 years, the Armenians remain confident that they will be able to maintain their community in Kirkuk for the foreseeable future.

15. (U) After 1918, many of Kirkuk's Armenians worked in technical jobs for the NOC at the behest of the British. According to Agob Yagobyan, the British hired mostly Armenians and Assyrians because the Arabs and Kurds were not well enough educated for the work. Today the Armenian neighborhood in Almas is full of British-built brick houses left over from the first half of the 20th century. Today eight of the 93 Armenian families in Kirkuk have members working for the NOC. Most other Armenian families work as machinists and mechanics and are known for their expertise in repairing engines of various kinds. The Armenian leaders stated that none of their community serves in the Iraqi Army, as it requires people to leave their home areas. Some are in the Iraqi Police, but the numbers are limited mainly because they do not have the connections in government necessary to obtain these jobs.

16. (U) The Armenian Church is the focal point of the Armenian community in Kirkuk. Services are held every Friday to correspond with the majority Islamic population and workweek. The Armenian church in Kirkuk was built in 1932 and is located in the Corea area, now predominantly Turkomen. Plans are under way to build a new Armenian church in the Almas area on land adjacent to the Armenian community headquarters building. The Armenian community holds numerous internal social functions and plays bingo every Friday

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night at the headquarters building. These events are closed to outsiders. While the Armenians converse fluently in Arabic, they maintain their dialect of the Armenian language at home. All Armenian children in Kirkuk attend Armenian language classes at the Armenian community headquarters building. The Armenian leaders stressed the importance of maintaining their "language, religion and ethnicity". They reported that Armenian is spoken in all the other Armenian communities in Iraq except in Zakho where they now only speak Kurdish.

17. (SBU) The Kirkuk Armenians prefer "Iraqi identification" when presented with the prospect of joining Kurdistan. They declared that they are Iraqi first and Armenian second. When their grandfathers immigrated to Kirkuk between 1915 and 1918, the Arabs in the area "welcomed" them and "helped them in all ways". They intimated that have closer ties to the Arabs in Kirkuk than the Kurds. They would prefer to see a "Kirkuk for the Kirkuki people". When asked how long the US military should stay in Iraq, the Armenian leaders appeared hesitant to answer and only said they have no problem with the Americans.

18. (U) The Armenians made clear that they are fiercely protective of their independence as a community. They repeated several times during their meeting with the PRT their desire to remain removed from politics in the province. In the summer of 2008 the Armenians were offered a designated position on the Kirkuk City Council - an offer they refused, citing their preference to not get involved in Kirkuk's political landscape. Keork Stragyam referred to a saying in Arabic which says you cannot get bitten by the same snake twice; the lessons learned from Turkey in the early 20th century are still fresh for Kirkuk's Armenians. This was practically the only subject that seemed to bother them as they stated that they are still waiting for Turkey to apologize. The Armenian community is largely closed; however they do maintain social contact with the Assyrian community in Kirkuk (they were proud to point out that their names end in the same "yam" suffix and it is how to distinguish them from other ethnicities). Traditionally, marriages have only occurred between Armenian families; however, due to dwindling numbers there have been "a few" recent cases of Armenians marrying Assyrians in Kirkuk.

19. (SBU) COMMENT: The Armenian community in Kirkuk, despite its small size, appears strong, well adjusted and self reliant. They had few complaints about their situation and seemed only to want to be left alone. Their headquarters building was well furnished and undergoing renovations - demonstrating their relative material wealth. They did cite the same concerns as other religious minorities about the lack of any funding from the central government. There is no evidence that the Armenians are experiencing any persecution or discrimination in Kirkuk province, and they clearly stated this. Their desire to remain identified with Iraq's Central Government likely reflects their close ties to the Armenian Church in Baghdad. It is highly unlikely that the Armenians will play any role in Kirkuk's political future, due entirely to their own preferences and actions. END COMMENT.  
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